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# Health Science eContent Distribution: The Challenges and Opportunities

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# Health Science eContent Distribution: The Challenges and Opportunities



by **Sherry Thompson** (Vice President, Library Services, Majors Scientific Books, P.O. Box 819074, Dallas, TX 75381-9074; Phone: 800-633-1851; Fax: 972-353-1300) <sthompson@majors.com>

**Majors Scientific Books**, a health science book distributor since 1909, prides itself on being a "one stop shop" for available health sciences information, no matter the container, for the scientific community. Our vision statement expresses it in the following way: "To be a provider of accurate information to the scientific and business community: be it print or electronic, be it content or bibliographic information." Prior to 1993, **Majors** was organized into three primary service areas—books, continuation/serials, and journal subscriptions. Although equally committed to all three, we decided in the early nineties to sell **Majors Scientific Subscriptions**. Our competitors' focus on newly developed document delivery services suggested we would need to make a significant financial investment to remain competitive in that market. For the first time in our history we limited our vision statement and excluded content packaged as journals.

## The eBook and the National Library from page 32

mutually beneficial processes to achieve a mutually beneficial goal: the satisfaction of the reader.

### Endnotes

1. A concept explored in detail in Evans, P. & Wurster T. S. *Blown to Bits: How the economics of information transforms strategy* (2000) Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
2. Cha, A. E. "Books by the Byte; Libraries' E-Lending Opens With a Subplot: Copyright" (July 4<sup>th</sup> 2001) *Washington Post* <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16060-2001Jul3.html>.
3. <http://www.questia.com>.
4. <http://www.ebrary.com>.
5. See, for example, an email to web4lib, 1 February 2001. <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Web4Lib/archive/0102/0006.html>.
6. Brindley, L. "Taking the British Library forward in the twenty-first century" *D-Lib Magazine* (Vol 6 No 11 Nov 2000) <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/november00/brindley/11brindley.html>.
7. Now more extensively expressed in *The British Library: New Strategic Directions* (May 2001) a strategy discussion document available at <http://www.bl.uk/>.
8. *ibid*.
9. Personal communication, August 2001.
10. The Library of Congress already has the necessary legislative framework to enforce deposit of e-publications, but is not doing so until it can properly understand and express the requirements.

However, the divestment of the subscriptions divisions allowed us to fully concentrate on developing additional services for our library customers using the newly accessible World Wide Web. Web services are used to gain up-to-the-minute information on medical titles, their availability for sale, and tools for tracking customer purchases. We've also developed new skill sets valuable to operating in the eCommerce and eContent environment. Even though disintermediation is considered a natural result of eContent availability, it is in reality creating new partnerships and increased cooperation. No one wants to hear the word disintermediation in association with their profession and our intention is to remain a viable part of the supply chain.

Since the subscription division divestiture, monographs made their commercial debut as eContent. Our subscription jobber experience is proving helpful to us as we determine our path for distributing content instead of objects. Our focus at **Majors** is evolving to include questions about how our identity might change if and should we become primarily a distributor of electronic content. Physical books lend themselves to control. The process is straightforward and simple: order the book (CD, audio cassettes, video, etc.) from the publisher; receive it into the warehouse, pick pack and ship it for the customer, invoice and collect the payment. Of course, there are many variations on the theme, but overall it's consistent with distribution methodology. eContent lacks a physical container allowing it to defy the types of control normally imposed on physical objects. Depending on the publisher's intent for an eProduct, significant changes in its content could be made daily. From a monograph distribution point of view, content changes lead to new editions and thus a new product to sell. While updating ease is an attractive eContent feature, especially for health science literature, it brings with it new considerations for a print distributor. For the print distributor, inventory control is a defining element of the business. A distributor's inventory goals consist of having the right stock at the right time, timely order turnaround, accurate inventory selection, warehouse location in proximity to your customer, and adequate warehousing space. New goals and strategies will have to be created for the distribution of eContent, goals and strategies similar to ones for subscription jobbers: problem-solving ability, customer service skills and strategies that address the management of data.

The benefits of eContent distribution are numerous: no returns, no warehousing space, no damages, no inventory control. However, there will be new problems to solve, ones in-

herent in distributing data rather than objects. The hurdles include everything from licensing issues, potential access problems, internal and external customer training issues, negotiation disagreements between parties, to solving misunderstandings about contracts. Regardless of what you distribute or how you do it, customer service is the most important skill needed by any distributor since that is the criterion most often used by customers, that is what customers remember. Our Account Specialists may need new skills to meet the challenges of eContent distribution, but fortunately their customer service skills are transferable. Again, our experience as a subscription agent continues to guide us as we define ourselves more broadly as information distributors. In the end, will we be a bookseller or a subscription agent or information broker or, most likely, some new combination of all three roles?

Everything indicates, and we agree, that print books will be around for a very long time; however, we have to prepare for a future with fewer print sales. When CDs came onto the market, health science print sales increased. This was a surprise, but the CD seemed to enhance, not compete with, the printed version. Comprehensive treatises with a lengthy publishing history will more than likely continue in their current print format for years to come. However, once a profitable eContent solution emerges, publishers may add an electronic version of print titles to their offerings along with original eContent titles. The power gained by adding video and interactive qualities to products used for teaching in the health sciences is exciting. Two products that stand out as examples of what we may see in the near future are *Stat Ref* and *MD Consult*. These two individually combine preferred medical tomes in their respective products with sophisticated proprietary search engines. Both are more ambitious in intent and design than a collection of stand alone eBooks. Because of their accessibility at the user's desktop, along with multiple title searching, both are popular in health science libraries. Time sensitivity is critical in the health sciences more so than in any other profession, and these kinds of products provide clinicians efficiencies not available with print materials. The electronic version of *Harrison's Text Book of Internal Medicine*, one of the best known and frequently used titles in the health sciences, became available several years ago. It is coexisting nicely with the print version. For the foreseeable future, and until the problems inherent to eContent delivery are resolved, we believe print books will continue to be health science publishers' format of choice.

*continued on page 35*

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>



As a distributor to a distinctive market, it is vital to understand how health sciences professionals use information. With the exception of the student who is required to buy the usual stack of texts each semester for classes, books are seldom read from cover to cover after the completion of a formal education. However, a health science practitioner never stops using information, regardless of its format. Practitioners do have format preferences however. As **Lew Reines**, former CEO of **W.B. Saunders** and currently the founder of **PocketMedicine.com**, said in a recent interview, "If we sold books only to people who read them, we wouldn't sell any at all—because, essentially, people are using medical books for reference..." This statement implies that health care professionals use chunks of information as opposed to entire books. In order to use pieces of information proficiently, effective access points are critical. Information must be organized so it is easily found and consequently the practitioner can access key information easily. Ideally, information needs to be accessible at the point of care. Handheld devices or PDAs that contain quick reference material and drug interaction products, as well as providing literature searching capabilities, are needed in the health care industry.


Health sciences distributors are listening more closely than ever to library professionals to help define their direction for new prod-

*In spite of the limitations noted, they are heavily used because they're available in a format that meets the information needs of the health science professional.*

ucts and services. At this year's **Charleston Conference** there was a Lively Lunch entitled "Trends and Concerns in Health Sciences Library Collection Development: PDAs, eBooks, etc." facilitated by **Ramune Kubilius** of **Northwestern University**. There were about twenty in attendance. **Ramune** asked attendees to introduce themselves and state their interest with regard to the topic. On a large pad of paper she had written the words "eBooks," "PDAs," and "electronic journals." As they stated their interests, she put a check by the corresponding word. One after another announced a desire to know more about PDA

content. All commented on the absence of widespread interest in PDA delivery by other conference attendees and were grateful to have a core group to discuss the subject. There was interest in what PDA products are already available, how to gain access to them, and how libraries would be circulating them. Three health science distributors were present and all hoped to gain insight into how health science librarians plan to manage eBook and PDA content, what content was in demand from their patrons, and if they would buy it from traditional sources. There was no question about the demand, it's there and it's for all types of eContent related to the health sciences. Unfortunately,

due to the standards and digital rights management blocks of which we're all aware, there's still a dearth of content available. This lack of content is a critical concern for health science librarians, students, and practitioners. The demand is clearly evidenced by the fact that there's scarcely a medical school library in the country that doesn't subscribe to **MD Consult** and **Ovid**. Both of these products include books along with their extensive electronic journal offerings. Each are incredibly expensive ranging anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000 per year! And, according to librarians, both products are heavily used. Each product includes only books from their parent publishing companies, **Elsevier** and **Wolters-Kluwer** respectively, so the available titles are minuscule in comparison to what's available in the field of health science publishing. According to their respective Web sites, only 90 titles are accessible between the two products! In spite of the limitations noted, they are heavily used because they're available in a format that meets the information needs of the health science professional.

The health science marketplace offers opportunities to distribute not only online eBook content and PDA content, but a variety of networked digital resources as well. **Majors** is watching all areas closely as we position ourselves for the future. In spite of all of the apparent challenges, we intend to continue to fulfill our vision statement and deliver crucial content to the health sciences community regardless of the container in which the content is published. 

#### SHERRY L. THOMPSON BIO

Sherry L. Thompson received her B.S. and M.I.S. from the University of North Texas. Her current position at **Majors**, where she's been employed for 18 years, is as Vice President of Library Services. Prior to its sale, she managed **Majors Scientific Subscriptions** for ten years.

## The Host with the Most: eBook Distribution to Libraries

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org> [www.ebookmap.net](http://www.ebookmap.net)

*"All life consists of moving objects from one place to another."*

— **Rob Somebody**, at a good party in 1986

In 1986, Rob's insightful comment referred only to the physical world, and particularly struck home with someone who spent his days getting books to libraries and living in a fourth-floor walkup. The concept of a digital object didn't exist then, except maybe in the minds of some alpha-nerds at **CalTech** or **MIT**. But digital objects surround us now, unnervingly invisible until manifested on a

screen. Like their physical counterparts, digital objects must often be moved from one place to another, and it's the distribution of one type of digital object—the eBook—that we'll consider in this article.

#### What is an eBook?

For our purposes here, let's use the **Association of American Publishers** definition:

"An eBook is a Literary Work in the form of a Digital Object consisting of one or more Unique Identifiers, Metadata, and a Monographic body of content, intended to be published and accessed electronically." (Takes a bit of the fun out of it, no?) In practice, the term "eBook" is a convenient, if imprecise, handle that encompasses a variety of reading experiences and methods for packaging and distributing digital content—some of which may be useful or appropriate to libraries, and others which may not be.

Some eBooks can be downloaded and read

*continued on page 36*

